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# Safe and Inclusive Learning Communities



EDMUND RICE EDUCATION  
AUSTRALIA





# **Safe & Inclusive Learning Communities**

**A national consultation report  
prepared for  
Edmund Rice Education Australia**

Peter Norden AO  
Norden Directions  
December 2016

Safe & Inclusive Learning Communities  
was commissioned by  
Edmund Rice Education Australia

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Our thanks also to the Catholic Secondary Schools personnel who participated in this national study, and to the staff of the Ignatius Centre for social policy and research, for their assistance to the Consultant, Peter Norden, in the preparation of this report.

The earlier version of this report, *Not So Straight*, was published by the Ignatius Centre for social policy and research, the research arm of Jesuit Social Services in 2006.

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# Forward

Edmund Rice Education Australia commissioned this consultative report to develop a resource for the teachers and educational administrators working in their schools and educational centres throughout Australia.

Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA) has a membership of 53 schools (including 35 secondary schools and 19 Flexible Learning Centres) enrolling close to 40,000 students. There is a further network of 34 Associate Colleges throughout Australia and 5 New Zealand Partner Colleges.

EREA was established by the Christian Brothers in 2007 and it now has full responsibility for the schools operated by the Brothers at that time.

In addition to the secondary colleges there are a number of Flexible Learning Centres operated by Youth+. These centres are located in all parts of Australia and they offer a flexible education for young people disenfranchised from the education system and from many aspects of society.

The network was established to ensure the continuation of the charism of Edmund Rice in school ministry within the mission of the Australian Church.

The EREA Charter has four key touchstones which the members of the network aspire to be faithful to:

- Liberating Education
- Gospel Spirituality
- Inclusive Community
- Justice and Solidarity

In commissioning this consultative report, *Safe and Inclusive Learning Communities*, EREA seeks to enhance the way in which its educational facilities respond to the presence of gender diversity within its student populations.

This report is founded on a national research project that the writer conducted in 2006 that investigated how Catholic secondary schools across Australia best respond to the needs of same sex attracted students. That research led to the publication of the report, *Not So Straight*, by Jesuit Social Services. *Not So Straight* became the focus of a series of staff development workshops that the consultant conducted for the Principals of Catholic Secondary Colleges throughout the country during 2007.

## Human Rights Obligations

In 2016, the consultant published the findings of *Not So Straight* and elaborated on the human rights implications of the findings of that research in an article recently published in the *Australian Journal of Human Rights*: “Not so straight: engaging same-sex-attracted students in Catholic secondary schools – an Australian study” (AJHR 2016, 22,1, 179-201).

That recent academic article in the *Australian Human Rights Journal* highlighted the obligations that Australian educational administrators have to fulfil the requirements of both the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In relation to the human rights obligations towards young people, the article reported:

Specifically in relation to the rights of students, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, upheld the view that the best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them (Article 3), that the child has the right to freedom of expression (Article 13), that the child has the right to be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence (Article 19), and, in relation to the right to education, it should be achieved on the basis of equal opportunity and in a fashion that respects the child's human dignity (Article 28). (AJHR (2016), Norden Peter, 183)

The article further concluded that:

Each of these sections of the Convention on the Rights of the child clearly applies to the circumstances of those young people with diverse sexualities or identifications. They should particularly apply to those young people whose development could be significantly impacted by the imposition of a discriminatory or exclusionary policy of education with regard to religious values or a dominant majority (Ibid).

## **Safe Learning Environments**

EREA has sought the advice of this consultant as it proceeds to develop guidelines for supporting sexual and gender diversity in its schools and flexible learning centres.

Its Positional Statements with regard to Safe and Inclusive Learning Communities reflect many of the findings of the consultant's research and recent publication, in terms of respect, inclusivity and acceptance of the person irrespective of their circumstance. Its Positional Statements further note that 'research clearly indicates that students achieve their potential in safe and supportive learning environments'.

Further the EREA Positional Statements note that "Students who are same sex attracted, transgender, intersex or questioning their sexuality can be some of the most marginalised in society which can impact on their physical and psychological health'.

In the last twelve months, there has been considerable discussion in the community and in the media about the issue of maintaining a safe learning environment for students displaying gender diversity.

This report is founded on the values and principles clearly outlined in the Federal Government's '**National Safe Schools Framework**'. This national framework was developed in 2003 with the support of the Department of Education, Science and Training. It was further revised in 2010 and updated in 2013 by the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC). All schools receiving public funding in Australia are obligated to work in line with these principles outlined in the National Safe Schools Framework:

The Framework adopts a whole school approach to safety and wellbeing. It provides a comprehensive range of evidence-informed practices to guide schools in preventing and responding to incidents of harassment, aggression, violence and situations of bullying and to implement their responsibilities in relation to child protection issues.  
([www.safeschoolshub.edu.au](http://www.safeschoolshub.edu.au))

This Federal Government Framework is based on the following overarching vision:

All Australian schools are safe, supportive and respectful teaching and learning communities that promote student wellbeing.

The Framework identifies nine elements to assist Australian schools to continue to create teaching and learning communities where all members of the school community both feel and are safe from harassment, aggression, violence and bullying:

1. Leadership commitment to a safe school
2. A supportive and connected school culture
3. Policies and procedures
4. Professional learning
5. Positive behaviour management
6. Engagement, skill development and safe school curriculum
7. A focus on student wellbeing and student ownership
8. Early intervention and targeted support
9. Partnerships with families and community

This vision and these principles are consistent with the findings of the research undertaken by this consultant and used in the delivery of inservice training workshops for Catholic secondary school Principals throughout Australia.

The Charter of EREA is clearly consistent with the requirements of this national framework and its Positional Statements in relation to safe and inclusive learning communities clearly give expression to the nine elements of the national framework.

### **The Challenge for Inclusive Education is Urgent**

The initiative of EREA to consult more broadly and to ensure that the leadership and staff of their member agencies are well trained to provide a safe learning environment, especially for gender diverse and questioning young people, is welcome.

It is particularly urgent at this time as recent reports indicate that the Australian youth suicide rate is at its highest in 10 years. The national number of suicide deaths in 2015 for the first time surpassed the 3,000 mark.

Orygen, the National Centre for Excellence in Youth Mental Health, reported in November 2016 that in the previous 12 months 'more young people aged 15-24 years died by suicide than any other means (including transport accidents and accidental poisonings)'.

The Orygen report noted that 'Twice as many young women aged 15-19 years died by suicide in 2015 than in 2005 and rates have also increased among young people under the age of 14 years'.

This report is alarming, particularly given the clear relationship between suicide risk and diverse sexual orientation which has been established in the research literature for more than 20 years now.

A recent Australian research report, *Growing Up Queer* (2014) by Professor Kerry Robinson et al from the University of Western Sydney found that 'schools were identified as the major site in which homophobia and transphobia prevailed' and that 'the failure of some teachers to intervene in harassment and abuse, and/or directing homophobic and transphobic comment at students, was experienced as a violation of trust'.

Given this increasingly alarming situation, the initiative of Edmund Rice Education Australia is particularly welcome in relation to the needs of gender diverse and questioning students in their schools throughout Australia.



As noted in Positional Statement Number 2, 'Jesus of Nazareth demonstrated through his words and actions a radical vision of inclusiveness'.

The Charter of EREA seeks to give expression to Gospel Spirituality and the national network 'invites people into the story of Jesus and to strive to make his message of compassion, justice and peace a living reality within our community.

The challenge faced by educational administrators and educators today is increasingly complex. That challenge can be supported by considered reflection on human rights principles and Christian values, concretely applied in the living reality of the lives of young Australians today.

**Peter Norden AO**  
**December 2016**





## Genesis 1:27,31

God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them... God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.



# Preface

The Christian Church believes that every person is made in the image and likeness of God. The human person is defined in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis on the basis of a relationship with God.

This report, prepared as a resource and training document for school administrators in Catholic schools, focuses on the needs of “same sex attracted students” among the 760,000 students who attend Catholic schools in Australia today.

The term “same sex attracted” is preferred to the descriptive word “homosexual”, in keeping with the teaching of the Church as expressed in the 1986 Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which said:

The human person, made in the image of likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation. Everyone living on the face of the earth has personal problems and difficulties, but challenges to growth, strength, talents and gifts as well. Today, the Church provides a badly needed context for the care of the human person when she refuses to consider the person as a “heterosexual” or a “homosexual” and insists that every person has a fundamental identity: a creature of God, and by grace, His child and heir to eternal life.

Certainly, the term “same sex attracted” is more appropriate when used in relation to adolescents, since the experience of same sex attraction certainly does not indicate in all cases a fixed, or lasting, homosexual orientation.

This report is the second in a series to highlight good practice in Catholic schools. The first, *Keeping Them Connected*, was presented to Catholic school administrators in March 2005 by The Ignatius Centre, the research and policy arm of Jesuit Social Services. That report highlighted “good practice” among Australian Catholic secondary schools in response to incidents of illicit drug use. It has since been used extensively as a resource and training document in workshops conducted throughout the country with Catholic school Principals.

The motivation for undertaking these two areas of research and consultation with the Catholic secondary school network arises from the experience of the direct service programs of Jesuit Social Services, working with young people in need, over the last thirty years.

Being exposed through our Christian service ministry to young people who have significant mental health issues, who may resort to the use of illicit drugs, who are prone to self-harm and suicide, or whose behaviour all too often leads them into contact with the instrumentalities of the criminal justice system, has led Jesuit Social Services to recognise the need for preventative intervention.

*Safe & Inclusive Learning Communities* is a national study prepared for Edmund Rice Education Australia examining how Catholic schools can best respond to the needs of same sex attracted students.

Such young people are well represented in our social service programs and are significantly over-represented in that group of young Australians who resort to self-harm or suicide. Yet in many schools same-sex attracted students remain completely invisible and there is a virtual absence of discussion on, and engagement with, the issue of homosexuality. This is despite two recent Australian studies that have identified 11 per cent (Hillier, Warr & Haste, 1996) and 8-9 per cent (Lindsay, Smith & Resenthall, 1997) of secondary school students as not exclusively attracted to people of the opposite sex.

*Safe & Inclusive Learning Communities* highlights “good practice” among those Catholic secondary schools that have responded to the needs of such students. These are schools that have taken steps to make their campuses both safe and inclusive learning environments.

While the report is intended as a resource and training document for Catholic school administrators, counsellors and teachers, it will clearly be of interest and value to those outside the Catholic education network.

The report identifies four inter-connected levels of possible intervention:

- Pastoral care, welfare and counselling of students
- Staff development and training
- School curriculum and availability of information and resources
- The fostering and sustaining of an inclusive school culture and the development of school community relationships

While there exists a considerable body of work that deals with the needs of same sex attracted students, *Safe & Inclusive Learning Communities* has been prepared with the specific needs of the Catholic school environment in mind.

The Catholic Church has maintained a very clear and consistent body of teachings, presuppositions and viewpoints regarding the expression of love and the question of human sexuality. These teachings have helped shape Catholic Church values and principles in relation to human sexuality and sexual expression. These values and principles have been central in the formulation of the recommendations presented in this publication.

It is critically important that such values and principles remain central in the formulation of pastoral practices that will create safe and nurturing learning environments for students in Australian Catholic secondary schools of the future.

Peter Norden AO Adjunct Professor RMIT University

Executive Director Norden Directions









## How the consultation was undertaken

This national research project was undertaken in consultation with a very wide range of personnel involved in the management and administration of Catholic education in each State and Territory of Australia.

The project built on our earlier consultation, *Keeping Them Connected*, which identified “good practice” in Catholic secondary schools around Australia in response to incidents of illicit drug use by students (Norden, 2005).

That consultation was funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training and received in principle support from the Australian Catholic Education Commission.

This consultation was privately funded. Research staff from the Ignatius Centre, the policy and research arm of Jesuit Social Services, were assigned to assist the Consultant, Peter Norden, with the gathering of data and the assessment of information and reports.

In the consultation undertaken in the preparation of *Keeping Them Connected*, the Catholic Education Offices in each State and Territory were formally involved in the planning and the process of consulting personnel in the field.

The focus of this current report on the needs of same sex attracted students made it difficult for some Catholic Education Offices to engage with the process of consultation.

The issue of same sex attracted students and how the Catholic education system can best respond to their pastoral needs was not one which each of the States and Territories offices had formally dealt with.

It was discovered that some State and Territory Catholic Education Offices had encountered difficulties in formally devising a policy in relation to this matter, because of the perceived conflict with the Catholic Church’s teaching about homosexuality.

When making preliminary approaches to these offices in relation to the planned research consultation, some senior staff showed considerable uncertainty and trepidation in assessing how their office might formally cooperate in the project.

When the focus of this consultation was raised, without exception, senior staff of Catholic Education Offices around the country identified the issue of the pastoral care of same sex attracted students as a matter of considerable pastoral concern. They identified from their own experience a high correlation between this group of students in their care and high levels of self-harm and in some cases, youth suicide.

One senior staff member of the Catholic Education Office of a major metropolitan city indicated that his office was committed to cooperating in the project, but after several months' delay in obtaining a response, the Consultant decided to pursue alternative avenues of assistance.

For this reason, the Australian Conference of the Leaders of Religious Institutes (ACLRI), the national peak body for the leaders of the Catholic Religious Orders and Congregations working in Australia, was seen as a more effective avenue for accessing school administrators, counseling staff and classroom teachers in relation to the needs of same sex attracted students in each State and Territory of Australia. The senior representatives of the Religious Orders and Congregations contacted were enthusiastic about cooperating in the research consultation.

A regional superior of one of the major teaching Congregations was appointed as a key liaison person from the Australian Conference of the Leaders of Religious Institutes and that person arranged for referrals to be made to schools in each State and Territory that were identified as having experience in dealing with the needs of same sex attracted students.

Visits were arranged to States and Territories during the months of June, July and August 2006, and in each State and Territory a sample of secondary schools was identified to assist the Consultant during the investigative stage.

According to the latest statistics available (National Catholic Education Commission, 2015), there are 349 Catholic secondary schools in Australia, with a total of 360,790 students enrolled and 28,071 teaching staff employed.

The Principals of the Catholic secondary schools contacted were enthusiastic about contributing to the national consultation and in each case identified their need for resource material and guidelines that reflected Catholic moral values and pastoral principles in responding to the needs of same sex attracted students in their schools. More than forty Principals were consulted as part of this project.

In addition to staff from Catholic Secondary Schools in each State and Territory, key personnel working within several Catholic Education Offices were consulted as part of the research task. Fifteen senior staff were consulted from Catholic Education Offices.

All of the personnel consulted in Catholic Education Offices felt that this matter was one which needed urgent and careful attention. There was, however, significant variation in their capacity or willingness to take part in the consultation.

Some Catholic Education Offices had completed significant recent work in this field, for example in the Archdiocese of Brisbane: *Homophobia: Some Issues for the Catholic School*; and in the Diocese of Parramatta: *Sexual Health Matters: A Sexuality Resource for Catholic Secondary Schools*.

Other States and Territories were still considering ways in which they could make a constructive response themselves.

In addition to the Principals consulted, a further group of twelve senior teaching and administrative staff participated in the national consultation.

Fifteen welfare staff or welfare coordinators also met with the Consultant as part of this project.

Given the delicate and sensitive nature of the research task, the Consultant decided that it would not be appropriate to conduct focus groups of students as part of the consultation (as had been done in all States and Territories except Victoria on the previous consultation on drug incidents: *Keeping Them Connected*).

Instead, the Consultant met with twelve graduates of Catholic secondary schools in different States and Territories. These former students reflected on their experience of how their secondary schools responded, or failed to respond, to this issue in their lives and in the lives of their fellow students.

Again, without exception, all of the graduates from Catholic Secondary Schools felt that more could have been done, and more should now be done, to help all students apply the Catholic Church's moral teachings and pastoral practice to this important situation.

An advisory group was established to guide the Consultant in the shaping of the research approach and in the final stages of formulating the recommendations and the published report of the consultation. This advisory group was broadly representative of senior staff in Catholic Education Offices and experienced school Principals and student counsellors.

The Consultant did not use standardized survey forms, since the circumstances in each State and Territory varied so much, and the issues were different for senior policy staff, school Principals, welfare staff and former students.

In most cases the Consultant met directly with the individuals concerned, in some cases it was necessary to limit the interview to telephone contact because of distance and time limitations.

In each case the information that was sought included policies, procedures, programs and curriculum from either within the Catholic Education Offices or from within a Catholic secondary school that could be regarded as "good practice" in responding to the needs of same sex attracted students.

Upon completion of the report, copies were made available to the Catholic Education Offices in each State and Territory of Australia. The published research report is intended to act as a resource document for the ongoing staff development of Principals and senior staff of Catholic Secondary Schools throughout Australia.

*Keeping Them Connected* (Norden, 2005) has already been used in training or in-service workshops for 135 Catholic secondary school Principals in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia since its publication. More than 1,500 copies of the report have been sold to personnel working within the Catholic education system.

This current report, *Safe and Inclusive Learning Communities*, is intended to be used in the same way, providing the opportunity for Catholic secondary school Principals to learn from "good practice" already operational in Catholic secondary schools in different States and Territories of Australia.



The following chapter will address the challenge of how to promote a safe school environment for all students in Catholic secondary schools.

An extensive literature review has been conducted as part of the research task and this review highlights some of the most significant findings relevant to this area of need.

Included in the report is a further chapter identifying four key issues that emerged from the consultation and a further chapter outlining eleven case studies from schools in different locations around the country.

Finally, twenty-one recommendations are included in the final chapter.



# Promoting a safe school environment for all students in Catholic Secondary Schools

## 2.1 The National Catholic Schools System

Catholic schools around the country seek to establish learning environments for their students that are intellectually stimulating, consistent with gospel values, imbued with the Church's teaching and its mission, and nurturing the growth of each individual within a community of care.

Throughout Australia there are more than 1,700 Catholic schools, educating more than 760,000 students, representing approximately 20 percent of all students nationally. Approximately one in five school students in Australia attend Catholic schools.

**Table 1: Number of Catholic Schools and students in Catholic Schools in Australia**

	Catholic Schools	Students in Catholic Schools	Students in All Schools
	(Includes primary/secondary/combined/special levels of education)		
<b>ACT</b>	30	18,062	65,954
<b>NSW</b>	592	255,580	1,180,041
<b>VIC</b>	494	206,363	913,562
<b>QLD</b>	299	145,414	784,224
<b>SA</b>	103	47,798	262,233
<b>WA</b>	165	71,808	404,096
<b>TAS</b>	37	14,898	80,172
<b>NT</b>	17	5,134	40,412
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,737</b>	<b>765,057</b>	<b>3,730,694</b>

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools, Australia, 2015, Cat No. 4221.0, Tables 40a

The importance of establishing and maintaining a safe learning environment is critical to facilitating the intellectual challenge and personal growth of the students in our schools.

In recent years, there has been considerable attention given to the need to address bullying within schools throughout Australia (Rigby & Thomas, 2002). Bullying has been shown to correlate to early school drop out and student self-harm.

The recent national youth survey by Mission Australia (2006) noted that one in three young people report bullying as a significant issue for them. Schools were generally the context in which bullying took place. In 2002, Kids Help Line received almost 6,000 calls about bullying from young people around the country.

## **2.2 The National Safe Schools Framework**

The National Safe Schools Framework was developed in 2003 with the support of the Department of Education, Science and Training. It established an agreed national approach to help schools and their communities address issues of bullying, harassment, violence and child abuse and neglect. It reflects the fact that all State and Territory government and non- government education authorities, and the Commonwealth, are committed to working together to ensure the well being of all Australian students.

Some of the practices established in the National Safe Schools Framework (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003) to prevent and respond to bullying, harassment, violence and child abuse and neglect include:

- Providing guidance and advice to schools in the development of written policies;
- Encouraging and promoting whole-school approaches, including the involvement of parents through workshops, school boards and associations;
- Including child protection education in the school curriculum, as well as content that explores discriminatory behaviours through an understanding of social factors such as gender, race, sexuality, disability and religion;
- Providing professional development and training for school staff on methods of countering bullying and harassment;
- Providing specialist support for teachers who encounter or report abuse and who work with students who are persistently aggressive.

Catholic secondary schools specifically strive to provide an effective and accessible pastoral care program for their students, recognizing the vulnerability of the students' lives as they move through the complex transition from childhood to adulthood.

Catholic schools not only work well within the National Safe Schools Framework, but they bring an additional body of principles, values and traditions that can add a new dimension to the guidelines presented in that framework.

The National Framework recognizes the importance of social attitudes and values, and how they impact on the behaviour of students in school communities.

It recommends approaches to establishing safe school environments that:

- Value diversity
- Contribute positively to the safety and well being of all members of the community
- Act independently, justly, cooperatively and responsibly in school, work and civic and family relationships
- Contribute to the implementation of appropriate strategies that create and maintain a safe and supportive learning environment

## **2.3 Same sex attracted students and safe school environments**

Students who are same sex attracted represent a group of students within the secondary school context who have particular needs. These needs must be recognized and respected to enable these students to participate and fully engage in a safe school environment.

The recognition of those needs does not necessarily mean that the students themselves must in any way be publicly recognized or identified, either through their own actions or the actions of other students or members of staff.

But the recognition that there are same sex attracted students in every secondary school in Australia, and most likely in every classroom or sporting team or activity group, means that an environment is established that respects diversity and refuses to tolerate behaviour that communicates or perpetuates disrespect or ignorance.

The public concern about the impact of bullying behaviour within a school context is not matched with the same awareness or concern about the impact of such behaviour on same sex attracted students.

It is critically important that as schools work to create a safe school learning environment for students, there is a recognition that same sex attracted students are one of the most significant groups at risk of being bullied.

## **2.4 The importance of upholding a Catholic School ethos**

Catholic secondary schools represent a significant part of the Catholic Church's ministry throughout all States and Territories of Australia.

The Catholic Church has major commitments to three main areas of ministry outside of the local parish ministry: health, education and welfare.

In undertaking these areas of ministry, it is important that the values and teachings of the Church are given expression in the planning and management of these services.



The work of education, in helping to shape young lives in both primary and secondary and tertiary levels of Catholic education, is widely respected throughout the country. This respect has been earned over the years because of the way in which the Church's values and principles have been central to the growth and development of the Catholic educational system.

This applies especially in the area of secondary education, where this national consultation is particularly focused.

That is why it is critically important for the Church's teachings to be acknowledged and respected in the process of investigating "good practice" in Catholic secondary schools. These teachings have particular relevance to the experiences and the expectations of same sex attracted students.

This national consultation has been conducted with a clear commitment to the importance of upholding a Catholic school ethos that truthfully and honestly reflects the Church's teachings. This then allows the identification of effective and credible pastoral responses which meet the needs of the totality of all students in a school community.

This ethos has been applied successfully when the challenge has been to respond to students dealing with either physical or intellectual disability and with students coming from a diverse range of cultural and racial backgrounds. It has been applied with an increasing number of students in Catholic schools who have a commitment to different religious creeds, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam.

In the same way, this Catholic school ethos can ground the establishment of effective practices in relation to the circumstances of same sex attracted students. In turn, the whole school community benefits from a safer and more inclusive school environment.



# Literature review

## 3.1 Why same sex attracted students prefer to remain hidden

For many young people, school is a happy place. However, for a significant number of same sex attracted young people, school can be a place of discrimination and abuse.

In 2004, there were 1,459,000 Australian secondary school students. According to the National Catholic Education Commission, almost 300,000 of these attended Catholic secondary schools.

Recent Australian research (Hillier, Warr and Haste, 1995; Lindsay, Smith and Rosenthal, 1997) suggested that between 8 and 11 per cent of Australian secondary students are sexually attracted to members of their own sex. However, a large proportion of these same sex attracted youth choose to conceal their sexual identity rather than face the potentially negative reaction of their parents and peers.

Discrimination on the basis of sexual preference is illegal in Australia; however, an extensive investigation of such discrimination, conducted by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at LaTrobe University (Hillier, Turner and Mitchell, 2005) has revealed that nearly one third of participants from Australian secondary schools believed they had been unfairly treated or discriminated against because of their sexuality.

That same study showed that young students who are uncertain about their sexual identity are vulnerable. The experience of abuse and discrimination at the hands of peers, parents and in some cases teachers, leaves them susceptible to engaging in risk taking behaviour, such as drug taking, or resorting to self-harming.

Recent national youth surveys of Australian rural and regional centres (Mission Australia, 2006) report that one third of respondents place bullying and emotional abuse as the highest issue of importance and concern after suicide and self-harm, alcohol and drug issues and physical and sexual abuse.

### 3.2 Challenges facing Catholic education

There has been some research on the specific challenges facing Catholic education in dealing with same sex attracted students.

Maher (2003) has written on how to address the topic of homosexuality in Catholic education. His research included a document analysis of contemporary Catholic magisterial teaching on the philosophy of education as it pertains to the topic of homosexuality. He also surveyed American graduates and counsellors from the Catholic high school sector to ascertain the adequacy of practices in place.

His document analysis concluded that Catholic education must discuss the topic of homosexuality, must reduce homophobia in its students, parents and teachers through education, and must provide support services to gay and lesbian students. The survey of graduates showed a theme of disintegration, which he identified as a negative outcome in terms of the stated objectives of Catholic education. The survey of counsellors indicated that Catholic schools were not doing enough to help this population.

Coleman (1995) in his work *Homosexuality: Catholic Teaching and Pastoral Practice*, argued strongly that the teachings of both the Vatican and the United States Catholic Conference compel Catholic high schools to address the topic. He concluded that school staff must know the Church's teaching and be able to respond to students who identify as possibly being gay or lesbian. He suggested that schools must not only uphold the Church's position against same-sex sexual activity but also must uphold the Church's position against homophobia. He concluded that schools should have support groups for students questioning their sexual orientation, but that caution should be exercised in how those groups are conducted.

The Catholic school sector maintains an obligation to exercise a duty of care to their students. As long as same sex attracted students remain particularly susceptible to risk-taking and self-harming behaviour, Catholic schools are under a moral obligation to identify the steps that can be taken to prevent such behaviour.

Conigrave (1995) gave a graphic presentation of the discrimination faced by a young man discovering his homosexual identity while attending a Catholic all male school in Melbourne in the 1970's. Thirty years later, more often than not, the presence and the needs of same sex attracted students in Catholic schools remains unacknowledged, except in a minority of schools who have been prepared to address this issue.

The Catholic Secondary School sector has the ability, and the duty, to learn from the best examples of student support, from both the Catholic and Government sectors, and implement these in their students' best interests. Such knowledge would help shape wise leadership within the Catholic system, which uses not just common sense but good sense based on successful programs from around the country.

While same sex attraction is a sensitive issue, educating students on the reality of same sex attraction does not entail a promotion of homosexuality. Rather, same sex attraction education promotes recognition of the diversity of challenges faced by Australian Catholic secondary school students, raises awareness among students about how to cope with changing identity, while helping school administrators, counsellors and teachers to become more responsive to the needs of at risk students.

### **3.3 What is homophobia?**

The experience of discrimination suffered by some secondary students at the hands of their peers and teaching staff, on the basis of their same sex attraction, can often result from misunderstanding about sexual identity. Among adolescents, a lack of exposure to or education about same sex attraction can lead to homophobia.

Homophobia is defined in the Victorian Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health as 'a fear of alternate sexualities'; such unreasonable fear can often result in the possession of anti-homosexual beliefs and prejudices.

Homophobia is not a phobia or fear in the usual sense because it is usually characterised more by anger or contempt than fear. Flood and Hamilton (2005) identified homophobia with those who believe homosexuality is 'immoral' and found that 43 per cent of men and 27 per cent of women took this view. They found that while the victim of a traditional phobia is the one hurt by it, homophobia has the potential to inflict harm on others.

Homophobia can be both a conscious and unconscious set of attitudes and beliefs. Those with homophobic attitudes may not necessarily act in a discriminatory or aggressive way to same sex attracted individuals. However, homophobic attitudes are correlated with particular patterns of behaviour towards both homosexual and heterosexual individuals.

One of the main groups affected by homophobia is that of same-sex attracted young people, particularly those living in rural areas where there is greater social isolation from gay and lesbian peers and role models. A consequence of this discrimination for same sex attracted young people is that they have increased rates of homelessness, risk-taking behaviour, depression, suicide and episodes of self-harm compared to young heterosexuals (Bontempo and D'Augelli, 2002).

### **3.4 The experience of same sex attracted youth**

Young people who are same sex attracted experience victimisation, harassment and abuse because of their sexual identity. Same sex attracted youth are also often experiencing significant uncertainty about their sexual identity, leading to further vulnerability to abuse. As a result of understanding about different forms of sexual attraction, same sex attracted youth often experience rejection by family and friends, leading to further conflict, drug use and abuse, homelessness, self-harming behaviours, as well as attempted and successful suicide.



The report *Writing Themselves in 3* (2010) investigated sexual attraction and the impacts of discrimination and abuse on the basis of sexual preference among 15-21 year olds. This research identified that 69 per cent of respondents participating in the survey had suffered some form of maltreatment on the basis of their sexuality. In the 2010 report, 61 per cent reported having been subjected to verbal abuse, while 18 per cent had been physically assaulted.

This report concluded that “school remains the most” dangerous place for these young people to be, with 80 per cent of all abuse happening there. Among 14 to 17-year-olds, that figure rose to 89 per cent. In most cases, other students were the perpetrators of that abuse.

Physical and psychological abuse can take a terrible toll on young people. International research (Gibson, 1989; Remafedi, 1994; Quinn, 2003), as well as the practice experience of Jesuit Social Services, indicates that ongoing abuse can lead vulnerable people to resort to self-harming behaviours, including suicide.

After witnessing such risk-taking behaviour among the same sex attracted young people involved in Jesuit Social Services programs, the Connexions program was established in 1995 to offer counselling to vulnerable youth. This program engages young people in a relationship of trust and understanding in an attempt to stabilise their mental health and drug problems. It has worked effectively with vulnerable same sex attracted youth in Melbourne over the last decade; the insights learnt from this program led to a commitment to help shape early intervention. This commitment helped to form the motivation for undertaking this research project with the national Catholic schools network.

### **3.5 The importance of addressing same sex attraction in School Curriculum**

As well as having a mandate to provide a safe learning environment for their students, school authorities in Australia also have the responsibility for providing education about sexuality within a whole school approach to health education and personal development.

Education is instrumental in reducing incidents of abuse on the basis of sexual preference. International research has consistently indicated that young people trust the information they receive from school programs more than information from other sources (Rosenthal and Smith, 1995). A number of Australian Catholic Secondary Schools are already actively engaged in educating their students about the issues surrounding same sex attraction. Much can be learnt from the experiences of these Catholic schools.

Catholic Schools have a duty to offer pastoral care to their students. While they are charged with protecting their students from discrimination and abuse, they have an equal responsibility to educate non-same sex attracted students about homosexuality. As a result, there is a responsibility to improve the content and focus of same sex attraction education in the Catholic Secondary Schools.

One of the particular strategies for enhancing student wellbeing and resilience, as suggested by the Victorian Department of Education, is the development of sector wide “policies and strategies concerning overcoming violence, victimization and harassment, racism and homophobia to increase a sense of belonging and security for students” (Department of Education, Victoria, 1998).

A recent publication, *Safe Schools are Effective Schools* (Department of Education and Training, 2006), provides some strategies for responding to homophobic bullying. In recognising the sensitivity around the issue of teenage sexuality, this report recommends that “the utmost care should be given to the most appropriate strategies to manage the situation... the student who is being bullied should be consulted about how they would like the situation to be managed”.

This suggestion recognises that raising the matter of same sex attraction explicitly without the student’s approval within the school or in discussion with parents may be most inappropriate, and could result in serious or even tragic reactions on behalf of the student or students concerned. Often the focus on the bullying behaviour is more appropriate.

This strategy is relevant for both teachers and students. For many same sex attracted youth, the practices of school staff compounded their experience of discrimination. One example reported in the national youth survey (Hillier, Dempsey and Harrison, 1998) included not allowing same sex attracted young people to have the same rights as heterosexual students, such as not being able to take their partners to school dances or formals. Another discriminatory practice identified by the national youth survey included arbitrary rules that singled out same sex attracted youth for attention, such as not allowing them to change or shower with the rest of the class.

To avoid potential discrimination and abuse, many same sex attracted youth relegate their sexuality to a secret identity, not to be shared with teachers, counsellors and peers. Extensive surveying of same sex attracted youth by Hillier, Turner & Mitchell (2005) revealed that many worried what would happen to them if someone in the school or wider community found out about their sexual identity. They watched what had happened to others and feared a similar fate.

Feeling unable to reveal their true identity and relate honestly to their family and friends places a huge burden upon the shoulders of same sex attracted young people. “Tom”, one of the participants in the above survey relates the shame and guilt he felt about not being himself: “The worst thing about it is the guilt. Not the guilt at being gay, but the guilt at lying to your family and friends. That is where the shame comes from for me. Most of the time it is unbearable. I sneak and hide and lie” (Hillier, Dempsey and Harrison, 1998).

The same authors found that another consequence of having to hide their true identity is feelings of isolation and alienation, particularly for youth in rural areas. These feelings tended to lead to a negative self-image, lower self-esteem and depression among participants. These findings may go some way to explaining the higher rates of risk-taking and self-harming behaviour among same sex attracted youth.

### 3.6 Links between discrimination and self-harming behaviour

The inability to express one's sexuality, or to feel comfortable about that sexuality, places significant mental health pressures on the individual.

In a Western Australian study (Macdonald & Cooper, 1998), one of the main contributing factors reported for attempted suicide among young gay men was that they felt they had no-one to confide in. Isolation was emphasised as being the determining factor in the cited cases of attempted suicide. Each young man reported an initial period of turmoil and stress when he feared rejection by his family and friends. The young men reported feeling isolated, lonely, guilty and confused, and this had led them to resolve these feelings by attempting suicide.

Macdonald and Cooper reported (1998): "Each of the young men who contemplated or attempted suicide came from a family with a strong religious background...Although religion and religious homophobia may not be solely responsible for the young men's contemplation or attempts to suicide, they are important factors that should not be overlooked" (P.26).

Young people identifying as homosexual are far more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual young people. Cochran and Mays (2000) discovered from their research that same sex attracted young people are between 2 and 7 times more likely to attempt suicide; the study found that between 31 and 63 per cent of study participants had attempted suicide, with those living in rural areas at a far higher risk.

An Australian study, "Better Dead Than Gay" (Nicholas & Howard, 1998) found that young gay men aged 18 to 24 were 3.7 times more likely to attempt suicide, most commonly after identifying their attraction to members of the same sex.

In fact, the United States Department of Health and Human Services Task Force on Youth Suicide concluded that gay and lesbian young people may constitute up to 30 per cent of completed suicides, and a Canadian study found that gay men accounted for 62.5 per cent of all those attempting suicide (Bagley & Tremblay, 1998). The authors speculated that the predominant reason for gay young men being so strongly linked to attempted and successful suicide was the stress placed upon them by the process of revealing their sexual identity in a highly homophobic society. The greatest risk of attempting suicide occurred immediately prior to 'coming out.'

"The risk is believed to be particularly high for adolescent gays at the time of acknowledging their sexual orientation, and exacerbated by being subjected to community violence, loss of friendship or family rejection" (Victorian Suicide Prevention Task Force Report, 1997, P. 34).

Same sex attracted youth are usually reluctant to openly identify themselves as gay because of fears of rejection from 'mainstream' heterosexual society (Brown, 2002).

Repeated rejection and hostility from family and peers undermine feelings of self-worth, and contribute to psychological distress, suicide risk and irrational behaviour such as self-harming, drug use and unsafe sex.

### **3.7 Same sex attraction and drug use**

Russell, Driscoll and Truong (2002) in their study of American high school students confirmed earlier studies showing same sex attracted youth are at higher risk than their heterosexual peers for substance use and abuse. However, they found that the youths who appeared to be at highest risk were those who had romantic attractions to both sexes.

Smith, Lindsay and Rosenthal (1999) found six per cent of students in years 10 to 12 in Australian government schools reporting being currently attracted to members of their own sex. This group of young people was associated with more frequent binge drinking and a three to four fold greater rate of reporting injecting drug use within the previous twelve months.

Hillier, Turner and Mitchell from Latrobe University (2005) found that same sex attracted young people who had suffered abuse, were “significantly more likely to drink alcohol at least weekly, to smoke tobacco daily, to use marijuana weekly, party drugs monthly and to have ever used heroin.” Their comparison was made with the third national secondary school survey conducted in 2002.

Same sex attracted young people who had been physically abused were significantly more likely than those who had been verbally abused to use these drugs. Of all the group of same sex attracted school aged youth (14 to 17) who participated in the survey, 86 per cent said they had drunk alcohol in the past year; 51 per cent reported that they drank weekly.

The proportion of 14-17 year olds in the study who reported having used marijuana was 38 per cent. 10 per cent of those aged 14-21 used marijuana daily. While 53 per cent of respondents reported to having smoked cigarettes, only 17 per cent of the 14 to 17 year old age bracket smoked daily. As with marijuana use, same sex attracted young women were more likely to smoke cigarettes than young men.

While 25 per cent of the cohort reported to having tried party drugs, only 15 per cent of 14-17 year olds had done so. Only two per cent of young people reported to having used heroin in the past year, though most were only using a few times a year.

According to Hiller (2005) there are at least two explanations for same sex attracted drug use. The first is that drug use is a lifestyle choice and that these young people take drugs while participating in some aspects of gay recreational culture. The second is that young people take drugs to escape the isolation and pain of homophobia suffered at school and in the community.

### **3.8 Social isolation and the need for support**

Social and emotional isolation from peers, family, and other potential supports are among the primary reason same sex attracted youth engage in risk taking behaviour.

Telljohann and Price (1993) concluded that young gay men and lesbians, as members of a stigmatised group, require the support of sympathetic others to stabilise their behaviour.



While young heterosexuals usually have numerous sources of support through the difficult years of adolescence and early adulthood, these sources, peers, family and school, are often not available to same sex attracted young people.

This absence is particularly marked in rural and remote communities in Australia. Quinn (2003) explored the connection between rural suicide and same sex attracted youth, highlighting isolation, availability of information and acknowledgement of issues as central to the connection.

Another study, conducted by Nicholas and Howard (1998) found that not only are high levels of support related to positive mental health, but also that who provides that support is also crucial. For example, while friends are often supportive of same sex attracted youth, they found that this support was not related to suicidal ideation. However, being supported by an authority figure and family members, particularly one's father in the case of gay young men, was closely related to whether or not they had attempted suicide. This finding could also be extrapolated to be relevant for other authority figures, such as teachers and positive adult role models.

Hillier et al (1998) found that an important minority of same-sex attracted students disclosed their sexuality to staff members at their schools: 5 per cent to student welfare co-ordinators, 14 per cent to teachers. However, making such an admission to a teacher or a counsellor was often perceived by students as taking an unacceptable risk.

David Campos in *Understanding Gay and Lesbian Youth* (2005) in addressing the role of school staff in providing support, suggested that:

“When you remain silent, you are part of a vicious cycle for the gay and lesbian student that begins when other students use antigay language to humiliate one another. When students witness that the teacher intentionally ignores or dismisses the comments, everyone within earshot begins to believe that this type of language is socially acceptable.”

He noted that once students begin to believe that anti-gay language is permissible, some begin to believe that it is equally acceptable to physically harm students who are gay and lesbian or are perceived to be.

### **3.9 Implications for Catholic School Curriculum**

One implication from the body of research reviewed in this chapter is that same sex attracted students at Catholic Schools may be more at risk of drug and alcohol abuse and other forms of self-harming behaviour, than their heterosexual counterparts.

A supportive school environment, promoted by school administrators and involving teachers, enables same sex attracted students to feel more at ease with the challenges posed by their changing sexual identity. Further, this facilitates their accessing potential sources of assistance within the school, such as teachers, counsellors and their own peers. Where students are more inhibited to openly discuss their sexual diversity, such supports remain out of their reach.

Much of the Australian research to date shows that where homosexuality is discussed in the curriculum, it is generally in the context of the sexual health risks (Harrison and Hay, 1997; Seal, 1999; VGLRL, 2000).

While it is appropriate for in-school discussions of sexuality to take place as part of a wider discussion of sexual health, and particularly of HIV/AIDS prevention, Seal comments that “relegating discussions of homosexuality only to this arena runs the risk of conflating homosexuality and AIDS.” He found that for young people coming to terms with their sexual identity and orientation, “framing their sexuality within a discourse of disease may have damaging consequences.”

Seal found that where discussions of sexual attraction and sex education occurred only with reference to heterosexual practice, and therefore excluding the very real presence of same sex attraction among the student body, this encourages the process of denial among students confused about their sexual identity. This has negative consequences for the health and development of this at-risk group.

Within a Catholic school environment, the value and moral dimensions of the school must remain central in formulating such programs. Yarhouse (1998) highlighted the importance of counsellors and therapists not imposing their personal values and instead respecting the desire of a young person to live in accordance with the teachings of his religious community.

Programs developed for government schools or community groups must be able to incorporate such important ethical and inclusive principles. Seal (2003) developed a whole of school resource kit for implementing a comprehensive approach to support same sex attracted students and challenge homophobia. This has been successfully implemented in numerous Catholic secondary schools.

The negative consequences of failing to support young people who are confused about feelings of same sex attraction leads us to two conclusions. As long as school remains the most common site in which same-sex attracted youth experience verbal and physical abuse, then an important first step towards reducing drug use and self-harming behaviour among these at risk students would be the introduction of programs that combat the feelings of fear that give rise to such abuse.

The second conclusion is that in-school health activities that aim to moderate drug and alcohol abuse among students need to acknowledge the overrepresentation of same-sex attracted young people in their target audience. Once these programs recognise that behaviour such as drug taking is often fuelled by a crisis of identity, and that feelings of same sex attraction are a chief concern among secondary students, then these programs can operate more effectively.

The Catholic Secondary School sector is gradually developing its understanding that shifting sexual identity is a significant cause of risk-taking behaviour among secondary school-age young people.

In the following chapters, some ways in which Catholic secondary schools in different parts of Australia have effectively provided appropriate support and guidance for such young people are identified.

We hope that providing information and examples about effective models of pastoral intervention that have proved successful in a Catholic school environment will enable professional educators working within the moral framework of Catholic teaching to increase their effectiveness in dealing with this difficult and sensitive area of pastoral care.

We also believe this is equally applicable to other school sectors.









## Key issues emerging from the consultation: four levels of intervention

The key issues that emerged from the consultation were identified from the personal interviews conducted by the Consultant with staff of Catholic Education Offices, school Principals and senior school staff and recent graduates from Catholic Secondary Schools around the country.

There were four related levels identified as areas for possible intervention in educating the school community about same sex attracted students:

- Pastoral care and welfare and counselling services
- Staff development and training
- School curriculum and availability of information and resources
- The fostering and sustaining of an inclusive school culture including the development of school/community relationships

### 4.1 Pastoral care and welfare and counselling services

This section of the report contains several different examples that staff raised with the Consultant that illustrate the need for more information, training and professional support in this area.

During the investigation phase, the Consultant had the opportunity of meeting with a broad range of school personnel who had responsibility for the planning, supervision and implementation of pastoral care programs and services within Catholic Secondary Schools.

Throughout the country, pastoral care generally is an area of high priority for Catholic schools. There is also a serious commitment to the provision of a universal service for all students in secondary schools.

It is seen as a critical performance area in fulfilling both the educational and formation goals of Catholic education. Students whose aim it was to reach high academic standards, were also challenged and supported to deal with the developmental challenges and tasks of adolescence. Graduates of Catholic Secondary Schools were thought to be more effective witnesses of Christian faith and values in the wider society only if they were rounded persons, able to deal with diversity and change.



Not all schools were able to provide the level of pastoral care required and there was a very broad range of commitment of resources and personnel in this area identified.

Pastoral care and counselling in relation to the issue of same sex attracted students was often seen as just as much an issue for those students perceived as “straight” as for students for whom their developing alternative sexual orientation was a personal issue.

For example, it was reported to the Consultant in several States visited that the remark “Oh, that’s gay!” was a very common form of expression among Year 8 and Year 9 students. This was used to refer to something that they regarded as “not cool” or as a general put down or negative criticism or rejection, rather than in reference to sexual orientation.

Generally, students who were same sex attracted did not raise this matter with school personnel during their secondary school years. Some students at each school raised this matter directly with school counsellors. Another small group of students dealt with this issue as a consequence of their behaviour at school or the behaviour of other students towards them.

The frequency with which this issue was raised with school counsellors varied significantly from school to school surveyed. One senior school counsellor at a single sex boys’ school in Melbourne indicated that about two new students a month would present same sex attraction as an issue in a counselling setting at his school. He saw this as reflecting an improved and more open environment within the school.

That counsellor reported: “Our single sex student environment certainly lessens the opportunity to discuss the issue in the run of normal interactions and associations. It is important to identify the dominant culture and there can be a destructive dimension to the dominant culture in a single-sex male-only school”.

Other schools surveyed indicated that the number of students who raised this matter as an issue for advice or counselling would number only a handful a year.

A counsellor at a Sydney coeducational school indicated she expected the issue to be more frequently raised in coming years, given the ease with which students discussed the matter in general conversation, in classrooms, social settings and counselling sessions.

A Brisbane based school counsellor suggested that it was necessary for pastoral care staff to give signals that it was safe for students to raise this issue, for example by displaying posters that promote respect for others and their differences than specifically about same sex attraction.

Many counseling staff reported that some same sex attracted students wanted assistance with resolving the sense of guilt or shame they felt in the face of what they understood to be Church condemnation of homosexuality itself.

Students who were struggling with this conflict were often the students identified as dealing with depression and poor self-esteem.

Senior training staff within Catholic Education Offices were, in the main, very uncertain about how to advise, support and supervise school based counsellors in relation to balancing church teaching and their commitment to providing good pastoral care for all students.

The lack of clear guidance and support emerged as an area of high need for pastoral care staff and school counsellors dealing with the needs of same sex attracted students.

Many school-based counsellors resolved this issue by referring students to outside agencies specializing in dealing with same sex attracted students. Often these agencies were skilled in providing support services, but lacked any appreciation of a Catholic or Christian value base which was often sought after by the students themselves.

School counsellors sometimes also had to deal with students who had expressed aggressive sentiments or who had acted violently towards other students that they had identified, rightly or wrongly, as same sex attracted.

One Adelaide based counsellor reported that she had two cases present in the one year that focused on a student dealing with issues related to her mother living in a same sex partnership. The issue of church teaching about homosexuality was causing significant internal conflict in her relationship with her mother's partner.

Counsellors also reported how important it was to be well supported by the School Principal. It was suggested that this could be done by ensuring that a general level of understanding and knowledge was shared between school administration, counselling and pastoral care staff.

The need for confidentiality to be maintained in relation to the details of counselling and pastoral care settings was strongly stated. At the same time it was recognized that the counsellor's effectiveness was dependent on there being support and supervision for their ongoing work with students in such a complex and difficult area.

A coordinator of counselling services from within a Catholic Education Office warned that as students increase their willingness to identify themselves within the school environment as same sex attracted in coming years, there may be a backlash from central church authorities wishing to impose controls preventing sexual diversity from being openly identified within a Catholic Church educational institution.

## **4.2 Staff Development and Training**

Across the country, there was wide variation with regard to the provision of resources for staff development training made available from the Catholic Education Offices.

Most central offices have developed excellent guidelines for pastoral care of students. A good example is that produced by the Sydney Catholic Education Office: *Pastoral Care of Students in Catholic Schools* (2003). This document outlines the commitment of Catholic schools to the development of the whole person, which aims to develop Catholic school environments which:

- Provide loving, caring and secure environments
- Recognize the individuality and dignity of each student
- Foster life-giving relationships within the school community

Schools are invited to examine critically:

- The ways in which they foster the dignity, self-esteem and integrity of each person
- The quality of relationships within the school, and the pastoral care of each person
- The recognition given to the variety of learning styles of students

The New South Wales Catholic Education Commission has developed detailed guidelines for pastoral care in Catholic Schools (2003). These guidelines were based on the work of the Centre for Adolescent Health's Gatehouse Project and they outline three specific themes in its program of needs assessment and ongoing evaluation:

- Security: building a sense of security, trust and inclusiveness
- Communication: building skills and opportunities for communicating with and supporting each other
- Positive Regard: ensuring that all students have opportunities to participate in school life in ways that are valued and recognized.

Some dioceses, such as the Diocese of Parramatta (2005) had policies and programs for sex education and development, within which the needs of same sex attracted students were specifically mentioned. The Diocese of Broken Bay (2005) refers to gender and sexuality in its Pastoral Care Policy for Diocesan Systemic Schools.

In other dioceses, such as the Archdiocese of Brisbane (2005) the issue of homophobia is directly dealt with as an issue for Catholic Schools. With the imprimatur of the Archbishop, a discussion paper for Catholic schooling has been produced as an initiative of the Archdiocese "to encourage dialogue among gay and lesbian people and the Brisbane church".

In most dioceses, the issue of same sex attracted students in Catholic schools did not appear to be mentioned at all. In fact, in some dioceses, there appears to be a glaring absence of current guidelines or programs in relation to sex education generally.

In the absence of such material being made available, several schools to which the Consultant was referred had developed their own staff development programs and in-service training, without the support or assistance of Catholic Education Offices. In these situations, such initiatives have been taken by School Principals who realize that this issue cannot be ignored.

Nevertheless, it was not uncommon to find staff in Catholic secondary schools feeling most ill-equipped to deal with the issue of same sex attracted students within a Catholic school environment. Several experienced teachers reported that students repeatedly sought guidance or assistance in this area in classroom discussions, especially in religious education classes.

Staff and many students had some understanding of the Catholic Church's moral teaching about homosexual behaviour, but the area they identified as needing assistance in was in the interface between the church's moral teaching and pastoral practice. Many identified the key challenge as how to faithfully give expression to the church's teaching and moral values in the face of discrimination and aggressive or insulting behaviour directed towards same sex attracted students or staff.

Staff often reported a conflict between, on the one hand, the emphasis within Catholic schools on respect for the person, a belief that all human life is valued and the importance of an inclusive community, and, on the other, how same sex attracted people felt in the face of the church's teaching, or the treatment they sometimes received from other students, or even teaching staff, at Catholic schools.

Individual staff members, including the school counsellor or year level coordinators, were often the crusaders in this area. But in several schools consulted it was reported that there were staff who remained resistant and sometimes aggressively opposed to engaging in any form of in-service training programs addressing this difficult area.

The Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services, under the auspices of the Good Shepherd Sisters, have conducted two community based programs in recent years that have provided staff development and training for secondary schools. A number of Catholic schools have participated in these programs.

The first program, Kaleidoscope, operated on the Mornington Peninsula and while it reported substantial barriers and uncertainty in offering its services to some schools, the program conducted in-service workshops for more than 300 teachers and support staff in the region. These workshops gave staff the opportunity to discuss ways of supporting same sex attracted students in their school.

The second Good Shepherd program, Generation Q, was a community development project supporting same sex attracted and transgender young people in the western region of Melbourne. The program evaluation (Mead and Hillier, 2004) reported that: "more than half of the young people attending Generation Q disengaged from school because of the high levels of bullying, harassment and discrimination they experienced" (P. 2). In aiming to support same sex attracted young people, the program worked with sixteen local secondary schools across the region, implementing a whole school approach to creating a safe and supportive learning environment.

Mead and Hillier (2004) reported that: "The work was successful to varying degrees, depending on the commitment of the schools. Some were afraid of backlash from parents and the community, others struggled to make time for the work within a crowded curriculum and limited time was allocated to professional development training" (P.2).

### **4.3 School Curriculum and availability of information and resources**

In this national consultation, school curriculum was one of the critical areas identified for bringing about change within the Catholic school environment.

Schools had addressed the issue of bullying in many and varied ways, but the school curriculum enabled this issue to be dealt with in a manner that was integrated into the everyday learning environment of all students. Most schools now recognize that dealing with bullying only in the disciplinary area of school life left the school's response as a reactive one.

Instead the issue of homophobia and the issue of sexual diversity were seen to be most successfully dealt with in the school environment when it was included as information as part of the broader anti-bullying program and integrated into the teaching curriculum itself.



One school included the following list of behaviours under its anti-bullying and harassment policy:

- Any threatening or violent behaviour
- Name calling, teasing or exclusion
- Making negative or offensive comments about the family members or friends of others
- Putting down others and their achievements
- Spreading rumours
- Making negative or offensive comments about another's perceived sexuality, race, appearance or interests
- Nuisance calls/emails/text messages/chat lines
- Glaring and menacing gestures
- Demands for money or possessions
- Damaging personal belongings

One all male Catholic school sought to lessen the narrow definition of masculinity within its school culture. It saw an opportunity for doing this through the shaping of the school curriculum.

At that school, there had been a very deliberate policy of introducing subjects that do not fit the narrow definition of masculinity that had developed at the College. All students were now required to take Music and Food Technology classes. The school had a number of bands that tour and perform at events and assemblies. A musical is put on each year in cooperation with a neighboring girls' College. These activities are given pride of place alongside other achievements in the academic and sporting fields and are recognized at award ceremonies and in school publications. The provision of other lunchtime activities apart from football or physical activity was seen as an important message of acceptance of different needs and interests.

By broadening the school curriculum in these ways, that school had softened the overall school culture to be accepting of diversity of all kinds. The message the school was presenting is that it is alright for young men to be engaged in a range of different activities that express their diversity of interests and talents.

Access to reliable and balanced information and resources about heterosexual, lesbian and gay relationships and safe sex is an important part of a young person's education and development. Young people regard school and family as reliable sources of information and the media and their friends as less reliable (Hillier, Harrison and Dempsey, 1999).

While information about heterosexual relationships was widely available to young people from all four sources, with regard to same sex relationships few received information from school or family. This left them to rely on friends and the media instead.

School administrators generally reported an uncertainty about making available material in school libraries that dealt with sexual diversity or homosexuality.

School counsellors on the other hand found it helpful to display in their offices posters that emphasized respect for all individuals and recognition of different sexual orientations. They reported that such material often gave permission for students to raise matters of concern in relation to sexual orientation or identity.

Several of the counsellors interviewed emphasized that they exercised careful scrutiny of such materials, to ensure that what could be regarded as “promotional” material was omitted, making available educational and referral information.

It could be argued that to implement anti-homophobic education is to promote homosexuality. Flood (1997) responded to this suggestion: “Anti-homophobic education is not about promoting homosexuality, but about acknowledging the reality of the existence and relevance of homosexuality, in the same way that schools acknowledge the reality of diverse cultures and backgrounds. Adopting anti-homophobic policies and curricula is about student safety and students’ right to a respectful and supportive learning environment” (P.9).

#### **4.4 The fostering and sustaining of an inclusive school culture including the development of school/community relationships**

The development of an inclusive school culture requires the collaboration of a broad range of stakeholders. These include not only the School Principal as a central facilitator and leader, his or her teaching staff, parents and students, but also the administrators of the school.

This may include the School Board, Canonical Administrators, the Catholic Education Office, or the Leaders of the Religious Congregation that may be responsible for the broader policies and directions of the school program.

One approach presented to the Consultant as an example of a Congregation’s commitment to developing an inclusive approach to Catholic secondary education came from the Brigidine Schools Statement of Core Values. The Brigidine Order currently oversees seven Catholic Colleges in metropolitan and regional centers of Australia.

This approach emphasizes the importance of three components of effective school administration: a clear articulation of values; the development of policy emanating from those values; and the implementation of policy in a way which can be clearly seen as giving expression to those values.

Its Statement of Core Values says:

In Brigidine Education we will:

Be faithful to our Catholic heritage

Welcome all people, especially the most vulnerable

Celebrate all that is good with joy and gratitude

Engender a love of learning, hope and a sense of purpose

Image and practise justice and service

These principles become critical in shaping an inclusive school culture where in every class group of students there will be two or three students who will be questioning or pre-occupied with their sexual identity.

One Catholic secondary school managed by the Sisters of Mercy and located in a rural community reported to the Consultant how they had dealt with their special needs given the impact of their geographical location. This included the lack of local support groups, and the absence of role modeling of sexual diversity from within their local community. With the support of the Mercy Sister Principal, the school embarked on an awareness raising exercise, focusing on “celebrating diversity”.

This program involved in-service staff training with the Equal Opportunity Commissioner, the training of a senior group of students who acted as mentors for inclusive behaviour, and the shaping of an Ash Wednesday Prayer Service, which had as a focus those who had been discriminated against, including same sex attracted students in their school community.

The collaboration with a local community support organization was instrumental in the devising of these intervention strategies at this school in a rural location.

One current Catholic secondary school Principal of a single sex boys’ college was confronted with the need to address the issue of homophobia within his school when he received a letter from a former student in 1998. The letter urged the current Principal to work towards creating a safe and friendly environment for all students. In the former student’s letter quoted below, the school is identified only as “School X”:

I started at School X in grade 6 and graduated with HSC in 1980. Not many days passed during that time that I wasn’t harassed, bullied, ostracized or generally mistreated due to what others perceived to be my sexuality. Even well before I reached puberty and started to gain an understanding of myself, of my sexual identity, I was labeled as the class pooffer. Unfortunately, during this period I don’t recall any time when the school effectively tried to deal with this situation, let alone help me come to terms with my sexuality.

...So I graduated from School X a quiet, conservative, shy man, confused about my sexuality and wounded by my experience at School X ... It was only ten years and a nervous breakdown later that I finally came to terms with being a gay man.

Certainly the 1970’s at School X was a dark time and while I was uninvolved and unaware of the sexual molestation of boys that was going on at the time, I can also say that the school was at that time an extremely homophobic environment... There were probably 40 – 80 gay students, all of them experiencing the same oppressive, prejudiced and discriminatory environment during those formative years. My experience at School X is unfortunate and has had a lasting impact on my life...

So I suppose the real purpose of this letter is to pose some questions. I have no inside information on how the school is currently performing on this issue. But I often wonder. I wonder for the sake of the students that are there at the moment, that they should not experience what I did. That they should not leave School X emotionally damaged, confused, guilt-ridden and with an impression that their nature is essentially wrong, abnormal or second-class...

Please give some thought to what School X currently does to create an environment where every student, gay or straight, can grow naturally into a well-rounded happy individual...

This letter, powerful in its own right, also resonated with the experience of some staff at the time who were facing the reality of their own children being same sex attracted. There was a general recognition, informed and highlighted by a bullying survey conducted in the school, that although physical bullying was not a frequent occurrence, verbal harassment was still a significant problem. It was recognized that boys who were perceived to be different were frequently the targets of this bullying and that the bullying often took the form of suggesting, in a disparaging manner, that the student was homosexual.

The student body, to protect itself from these attitudes, developed a strong macho culture, which allowed only a very narrow definition of what it is to be male. The victims of the homophobic bullying were not necessarily same sex attracted but those who did not fit the narrow definition. These boys included the academic achievers. Homophobic bullying was directed towards the academic elite of the school; it was cool to be a fool, it was cool to be macho. With this understanding, and with a desire to improve academic performance, the college was aware of yet another good reason to deal with this issue.

In response the school established what it called “the Homophobic Taskforce” in November 1998. The purpose of the group was to gather information and resources, to talk about what was happening at the school, to review policies, and to look at ways of tackling homophobia and raising awareness around homosexuality.

The school recognized that it had a problem with homophobia among staff. Therefore the focus of the school’s efforts became the professional development of staff. The role of the School Principal was critical in facing these challenges. The Principal concerned has made many public statements about the inappropriateness of homophobic bullying and the consequences for young people. He has done this at school assemblies, at parent gatherings and by sending a letter to all parents about pastoral care, outlining specifically the concerns about homophobic bullying and the work of the school taskforce.

He explained that while Catholic teaching on homosexuality would be taught, the harassment of students who are different would not be accepted. The school has also been encouraged by the support and understanding shown by the religious order that conducts the school.

#### **4.5 Integration of four levels of intervention required**

During the consultation schools that were found to have successfully developed a positive pastoral response to the needs of same sex attracted students were those that had brought about an integration of the above four levels of intervention.

Where such a consistency of approach was found, there had been an effort to develop educational policies based on core Christian values and principles and the implementation of those policies were regularly checked against the foundational principles.

If the commitment to the needs of at-risk or marginal students rested with the student counsellor or welfare officer alone, or if there was a core group of teaching staff who actively resisted the implementation of an inclusive school policy, the school’s response remained fragmented.



The role of the School Principal was critical to the implementation of an integrated response, but he or she needed the support of the School Board and looked to the support of senior staff from the Catholic Education Office.

The Principal exercised a role of leadership with his or her teaching staff, but also needed to gain the understanding and the support of the parent body. Support was generally found to be forthcoming when such programs were presented to the parent body as an expression of the school's commitment to creating a safe learning environment for all students, and when it was made clear that such programs were educational and pastoral, not permissive or promotional of alternative lifestyles.

At times, individual parents were not comfortable with the approach taken by the school community and sought reassurance and further explanation of the approach taken. Some parents were found to be acting out of a well entrenched homophobic perspective and little could be done to change that disposition. But that response from individual parents did not represent the parent body and needed to be responded to appropriately.

Accounts were given to the Consultant where such individual parents had effectively vetoed the school's program of responding to same sex attracted students by appealing to church leaders. In doing so, it was reported that they had undermined the efforts of the whole school community to shape a pastoral response strategy to some of the school's students in greatest need.

School Boards, Canonical Administrators, Catholic Education Staff and Church Leaders have an important role to play in such situations, to facilitate understanding and cooperation and to avoid outcomes that lead to disillusionment and poorly integrated pastoral care programs.

The following chapter outlines a number of case studies that were presented to the Consultant during his visits to schools in different States and Territories around Australia.

These case studies are examples of good practice, giving expression to the key issues outlined in this chapter arising from the consultation.



## Case studies illustrating complex challenges

The following case studies were all actual situations presented to the Consultant as he visited or spoke with Catholic education administrative and teaching staff in secondary schools around Australia.

Some represent “good practice” while others illustrate how school authorities were forced to be reactive, rather than proactive because of the limitations of the school environment in being inclusive of students who displayed differences.

Such case studies reflect a lack of integration that sometimes exists in situations where people of good will struggle to give expression to Christian values and principles in programs responding to same sex attracted students.

The solution lies in a commitment by the school management and teaching staff to working on the “whole school environment”, so that students who are different do not have to conform or submerge their natural behaviour in order to be acceptable.

This would entail the school community addressing every instance of bullying, whether it arose from issues to do with same sex attraction or not. In this way, some of the examples provided below where students were forced to change their natural behaviour to avoid conflict would have been better dealt with by addressing the bullying behaviour itself, in such a way that students who wished to could be more honest about themselves and their sexual orientation within the school environment.

The accounts of these experiences that were shared with the Consultant are recorded as they were reported. No attempt has been made to edit the message they wished to convey.

No school has discovered the magic formula for dealing with this complex and difficult task, but some schools have worked hard to provide a safe, and inclusive learning environment for their students, an environment that they hope reflects their Christian mission.

## **5.1**

### **CASESTUDY 1**

#### **A tragic loss of life**

The school where I was earlier employed as a student counsellor could have been regarded as very “blokey”. It was a single sex boys school. I felt that there was a certain harshness in the school environment, something which seemed to be part of the whole school culture, its administration as well as its teaching staff.

Two students who had come to the attention of the pastoral care office during my time there later took their own lives. Both students had established an intensive, close, exclusive friendship with each other while they were only in year 9. We attempted to guide them and to counsel them to widen the scope of their friendship network, but with little success.

After a serious domestic disagreement with his mother, one of the students had to deal with the grief after his mother died suddenly in the latter part of the year. On the anniversary of her death the following year, that student took his own life.

The second student continued at the school, but in the following year when he was undergoing year 11 studies, he also took his own life.

As student counsellor, I look back and realize that both of these students, who were expressing homosexual attraction, had few role models within the school that they could identify with and with whom they might have been able to share some of their difficulties. We seemed inadequate in our attempts to intervene.

The school simply did not have the capacity to reach out to these students in their area of need at the time. I believe that the harshness of the school environment was partially responsible for the tragic outcome.

## 5.2

### CASESTUDY 2

#### Helping to modify confronting behaviour

I remember one of my students who raised a lot of concerns in his earlier years. I think it was in year 9 that his overly, in your face, gay mannerism and his extremely outgoing personality began prompting a counter-reaction from his fellow students.

As the person in charge of his home room, I realized that although this student had done nothing wrong except express himself honestly, he would need some counselling and support to avert danger or conflict along the way, over the coming four years.

In order to assist in this way, two of his classroom teachers were able to advise him on what could be seen as “engaging behaviour”, meaning ways of moderating the excesses of his enthusiasm and finding ways of balancing his reactions, in a way that other students were able to engage with.

In his earlier years, he connected well to several of the more popular female students, who sort of adopted him as part of their group.

During form assemblies, there were a number of times where I and his form coordinator discussed the importance for us as a Christian school to be inclusive and to accept students who are different in one way or another. The issue of same sex attraction was never mentioned publicly in any of these forums. In this way, the individual student that we were most concerned about never became the focus of public attention. The issue was only ever dealt with in a general way, which avoided unnecessary attention or embarrassment.

In this way I believe we created a safe space within the form during the year 9 level. The student was given the opportunity to express his individuality in a way that could be managed by the majority of the other students. At times he continued to go overboard, with youthful enthusiasm, and he was often advised that he might be forced to modify his behaviour because of the limitations of our current school environment.

By year 12, he was fully accepted by the male and the female students as an important and integral member of the school community. At that time, he had established a close friendship with another male student outside of the school community and was able to share something of that friendship with other students in the same way that they talked about their own friendships within and outside of the school.

## 5.3

### CASESTUDY 3

#### Improving practices in providing pastoral care

A new counsellor had just been appointed to our school, when I was the Year 11 coordinator. He was a recent graduate in psychology and although he had worked in a school as a teacher before his graduate studies, he had no previous counselling experience.

In the first week of the school term, he placed a notice on the student notice-board inviting students to attend a support group for students with same sex attraction.

The large notice in bright colors announced: Are you gay? Come and join the school gay and lesbian support group!

Our school community simply had not done its ground work to make such a direct approach possible. There was no program within which such an approach could have been integrated at the time. The counsellor's efforts were unsupported by the wider school environment and it turned out that this approach was counterproductive as a result.

Naturally, not one student attended the meeting. The student counsellor, despite his good intentions, failed to establish his credibility as an approachable member of staff. Students that I knew in my year level who had issues in relation to same sex attraction were simply not prepared to come forward at that stage and they were not ready to seek his counselling assistance. He lost the confidence of staff and students alike. He left the school before the mid- year break.

We learned from that experience how important it was to be very clear in setting appropriate parameters for the way in which school counsellors worked, and the importance of accountability mechanisms, to ensure that their efforts were fully integrated into the pastoral care efforts of the whole school.

We realized that our school had to do a lot more work before such an approach would produce positive results.



## 5.4

### CASESTUDY 4

#### Different cultural backgrounds

Our school is very diverse, in terms of different racial and cultural backgrounds. It is important to understand that these differences are very dramatic, even within a shared Catholic background and ethos.

We have had just a few students who have been prepared to be open about their same sex attractedness over the years. Most of the other students are quite happy to remain anonymous. As Principal, I am a strong believer that as a school community, we should be prepared to work with students at the level at which they are comfortable. I am not supportive of intervening into the privacy of students' lives, without cause, unless there is some behaviour that might be damaging to the interests of other students.

With the students who are open about their sexual attraction to others of the same sex, we are happy to acknowledge them as individuals. We do not promote their lifestyle, but we certainly do not condemn it either.

Some of our Philippino students came to see me because they believed that a Catholic school should not retain a student who was openly gay. They said:

"Isn't it against the Church's teaching since our school always proudly presents itself as a Catholic College?"

They felt that the students concerned should have been advised to leave our school and to attend the local Government High School instead.

This was a situation that, as Principal, I had to deal with very carefully. On reflection, I realized that the students were very sincere in the approach they had made to my office, but that I had to help them understand that pastoral care to students who are different is an essential part of our ethos as a Catholic school too.

By acknowledging the presence of our same sex attracted students as individuals and being comfortable with their circumstances we had unwittingly challenged some presuppositions of another group of students in our school.

With the help of our Religious Education Coordinator, we used some scriptural passages to show how Jesus dealt with equivalent situations in the gospel narratives. He was always seen to reach out to others with respect, understanding and compassion, despite their differences.

This approach seemed to help resolve the tension, and some weeks later I noticed the group of Philippino students mixing comfortably with one of the girls in Year 11, who had been one of the students that they had previously wanted me to transfer out of the College. I felt we had helped resolve a difficult situation.

## 5.5

### CASESTUDY 5

#### Correcting inappropriate behaviour

Three senior students were clowning around in the student lunchroom during recess one morning when I was on yard duty as a Year 11 form master.

They were in high spirits and joking and having a good time together.

I overheard one of them say to the other two: "You're just faggots, just stupid faggots, you are". While they were conscious that I was within hearing of their comments, my presence did not seem to have influenced their remarks, nor did they appear to think there was anything wrong with their behaviour.

Approaching the group, I said to the three students: "How do you think your language might affect other students in the vicinity who might take offence?"

The student defended his remark in a jovial way, saying: "Oh sir, we were just clowning around, we weren't serious."

Replying, I indicated that while I understood they were just clowning around, I thought that the use of the term "faggot" was a derogatory term, and could in fact be quite insensitive to other students in the vicinity, who might have heard the term being used in such a way.

"Think about how a student who was uncertain about his or her sexuality might respond to hearing the three of you use that term as a put down for a person like him", I suggested.

The students replied: "Oh sorry, Sir, we were just having some fun, and hadn't intended any harm to anyone".

"I know", I replied, " but if we are serious about creating a safe and respectful place for all students, that sort of remark could in fact be quite hurtful for some".

The fact that this sort of behaviour had been mentioned in our recent staff development forum gave me a little more confidence in intervening, which previously I don't think I would have been prepared to do.

## 5.6

### CASESTUDY 6

#### A parent education evening

We wanted to make our school a safe environment for all students. We did not want to tolerate bullying or turn a blind eye to derogatory comments to staff or students, in relation to possible sexual orientation. The challenge was how to bring this issue into our parent education evenings.

We knew that there was a broad range of expectations and experiences within our parent body. Some parents are quite concerned about the matter of sex education in school generally and are certainly very anxious about such matters as diversity of sexual orientation being raised. We also have some parents of students at our school who are living in a gay or lesbian relationship themselves and have made complaints about discriminatory behaviour on behalf of the school authorities. So we knew that it was going to be a challenging task!

Our senior school executive sat down to plan the evening and decided that the way in which the evening would be presented was going to be critically important.

We decided that we would highlight the central message as the importance of establishing and maintaining a safe learning environment for all students. So we dealt with occupational health and safety type issues first. Then, the issue of bullying was presented and we reported that our school was faring well in terms of not having many incidents, but that we could do better.

Form coordinators reported on the types of issues that had arisen over the previous twelve months, in relation to bullying incidents. These included racial taunts, boys' lack of respect for female students, unnecessarily aggressive behaviour on the sports field, and incidents relating to the issue of sexual orientation.

This enabled the issue we had become concerned about to be discussed in the public forum without highlighting it as a separate category. All parents were committed to building and maintaining a safe learning environment for their son or daughter. Our discussion was able to raise this sensitive issue in a way that did not embarrass or disturb any members of our school community. There were no complaints received from the parent body. We felt the process had been a success.

## 5.7

### CASESTUDY 7

#### **Catholic moral values and homosexuality**

Our Year 12 coordinator had been approached by two of our senior school prefects early in their final year suggesting that they would like something done as part of their religious education program about same sex attracted students and the Church's teaching about homosexuality.

There were no students that we were aware of who had raised this as an issue before, but it was clear that the student delegation knew that it was an issue for some of their fellow students.

How to continue to provide an inclusive and welcoming environment to all students? This had been a clear emphasis of our school assemblies over the previous twelve months. But we also needed to work out a way of presenting, and helping the students to understand the Church's teaching about homosexual relationships.

Rather than deal with this new dimension in a form assembly situation, the religious education coordinator and the form coordinator planned to deal with the issue in smaller classroom discussion groups. The difficulty was finding suitable senior teachers who were comfortable dealing with this issue. We really only had two teachers who felt equipped to interpret faithfully the Church's teaching in this area and to lead a discussion with senior students about how this teaching can be applied in a pastoral situation.

So a series of workshops were designed in which this issue was one of several topics to be covered, over a period of four weeks. Each student would cover each of the topics chosen, in a group size suitable for such a difficult discussion topic. Another topic covered was the Church's teaching about birth control, highlighting the centrality of procreation as part of the marriage relationship.

The workshop on homosexuality was able to carefully express the church's teaching about homosexual behaviour and to make the distinction between the moral rejection of certain behaviour and the acceptance and understanding of the person. The role of individual conscience in applying the moral teaching of the Church could then be discussed in this setting.

Students had certainly been aware of the Church's teaching, but few had been able to grasp the distinction between the rejection of the behaviour and the acceptance and engagement of the individual person who may have same sex attraction.



## 5.8

### CASESTUDY 8

#### Addressing whole of school culture

Our school is co-educational and is generally an engaging and friendly environment in which to work, for both staff and students. Very few of our students have identified themselves as same sex attracted, and those for whom it may have been an issue have understood that it is not necessary for them to do so.

Whenever one of our male students had identified himself that way, it has been our experience that he will be more willing to talk about it with female students, who generally are more receptive to such a personal revelation.

The female students are also more adept at challenging homophobic behaviour, such as comments like: “You’re a girl”, or, “that’s gay”. Our teaching staff had been less able to respond, at least in a consistent way, across the whole school campus.

Our female students were usually the ones who taught those who may have been the targets of taunts or personal criticism of this nature to respond with protective behaviour. Sometimes it simply meant asking the question: “What do you mean by that comment?” Or, “do you mean to suggest that anything to do with being gay is a bad thing, because I don’t believe that”. Or, “I am a girl and I am not prepared to accept your remark as some sort of put down”.

Since our female students were proficient at such responses, we understood that our whole staff community needed to learn to respond in a consistent way. We committed to do this because we felt, as a staff group, we needed to respond to such comments in a similar way to the way in which we would respond to racial comments made within the school context. They would not be tolerated and we agreed that homophobic comments should not be tolerated either.

Once there was staff agreement around this policy, it was much easier for individual staff members to feel confident in making such interventions. It did not take long for the message to get across that comments, of whatever nature, that put other students or staff down were not acceptable in our school community. It was based on a belief in the dignity of each individual, despite their differences.

## 5.9

### CASESTUDY 9

#### **Creating a safe, supportive, nurturing environment**

Our school had significant pastoral concerns as a result of a Year 8 student being bullied by a number of his fellow Year 8 students and a number of Year 9 students. When we assessed the numerous incidents, we found that the focus of a lot of the taunts was what could be described as the student's effeminate manner. We realized that this reflected badly on our school environment.

This student was an exceptionally talented young student, with well above average intelligence and with notable talents in the music area. We were concerned about the lasting impact on the student himself. The year level coordinator was concerned that the student might transfer to another school.

So as the senior student counsellor, accompanied by the year level coordinator, I arranged an appointment with the student's parents. I attempted to explain the difficulties to the student's parents as sensitively as possible. They both listened carefully, and, after considering what I had said, the father asked: "Are you indicating that you think our son is gay?"

I responded by explaining that this was being suggested by the taunts from other students in his form and so the school felt it important to bring them, as family, into the conversation. The issue I insisted was the impact of the bullying, not whatever his sexual orientation might be.

In response, the father replied by confirming their love for all their children, and that they loved this son, just as he was, whatever his sexual orientation happened to be in the long term.

So the parents agreed with our proposal to help him to develop some protective behaviour in response to any continued taunts that might not be observed by school staff. We agreed that the identified concern would be the bullying behaviour in order to protect their son who may not want the issue of his sexual orientation to be identified in any way, either in the family or in the school.

The student was quite articulate and we were able to coach him in some appropriate and balanced responses, in order to fortify him from being harmed further by inappropriate or unwelcome comments. Further, as a school community, we committed ourselves to working on changing the school environment so that such students would be able to be themselves.

The student remained in our college. He was frequently recognized and praised at school assemblies for his achievements. By year 11, he was totally accepted by students and staff alike. In year 12 he was appointed as Prefect of Music. He is now in his final years of studying Music at the Conservatorium. He is regarded as an outstanding graduate of our school community.

## 5.10

### CASESTUDY 10

#### **Broadening the definition of “an invited friend”**

Our Principal generally takes a pastoral approach to most student behaviour and is happy to allow students to test the boundaries a little, and to learn from making their own mistakes. But his capacities were tested last year, when one of our Year 12 boys made it known that he wanted to invite his male partner to the end of year social.

This student is one of the few students in our school who has identified his same sex attraction, and this has largely been accepted within his peer group. He felt that it was silly for him to ask a female companion to the graduation social. He had a young friend who was not a student at our school, but at a neighbouring government high school. He had asked our senior school counsellor whether he would be allowed to invite him to our end of year student function.

The fact that he wanted to ask his male friend would have been of no surprise to most of our other students, and he did not see it as a big issue. He was not making a big statement by proposing this, just wanted to be more honest about who he was as a person. This is clearly an admirable thing to be encouraged.

The Principal met with the student on Friday, after conferring with our school counsellor. He listened to his request and the reasons put forward, and indicated that he wanted to consider the matter over the week-end.

The following Monday, our Principal informed the student that he felt that if he invited his male friend to accompany him to the final year social, it could make some other students feel uncomfortable. The student's response was that the problem was the other students, in terms of their lack of tolerance, surely.

Our Principal explained to the student that while he accepted his position and his preference to ask his male friend to the formal, he decided not to give his approval, because it could become a point of conflict on a very special occasion. In doing this, he acknowledged the failure of the school community in terms of its tolerance and its capacity to deal with the student's honest request.

The student was disappointed with the Principal's decision because he realized that in making a choice for partner, he was forced to be dishonest to himself and the other students. So he asked his female next door neighbor to accompany him. This outcome was necessary because of our school's limitations.

We realized that the structure of the annual social was an exclusive one, forcing all students to find an opposite sex “partner”, rather than a friend to invite. So now our students are encouraged to invite a friend, a member of their family or even a neighbor. By broadening the categories of those who could be invited, the evening becomes more inclusive, rather than exclusive. This student brought about this positive change.

## 5.11

### CASESTUDY 11

#### Organising a Staff Development Training Program

Our major concern was to establish a safe school environment for same sex attracted students. We were influenced by a survey we conducted with former students about their experiences at our school in previous years. One of our students reported: "I felt I needed to stay invisible during the senior school year, simply in order to survive (as a same sex attracted person)".

In planning the program, we were very much aware of the importance of dealing with this issue in a Catholic school environment. We presented the findings of the survey of our former students to the whole staff group. One of the findings was that there was evidence that harsh gender stereotypes do exist at our school. There was also evidence from our staff meeting that there in fact were incidents of homophobic bullying at the school, although we felt that it was probably typical of most schools.

We committed to developing a program that would deal with this situation. An outside resource person was engaged, someone who needed to be very alert to the Catholic ethos and values.

A basic starting point was established that homophobic language simply was not acceptable in the school setting. This needed to be accepted by all members of staff, not just a select few who felt strongly about the issue.

The focus of the program was on students at risk, and we engaged the assistance of a focus group of former students of the College. We established clear codes of acceptable behaviour, without which we felt there was no way of challenging unacceptable behaviour.

Our former students told us: the issue of racial prejudice is often raised, why is the prejudicial treatment of same sex attracted students never raised in the school setting?

The parent representatives who were consulted expressed some of the fearful responses that are often expressed in church circles: that by even talking about this issue in a school setting you might lead some young people into a homosexual lifestyle who otherwise would never have been involved.

But the leadership of our Principal was critical in establishing the absolute need to create a safe school environment for all of our students.

The staff working group was composed of a broad representation: the school nurse, the arts and drama teacher, a physical education teacher, the senior student counsellor and the Year 11 coordinator. The safe school program was approved by the School Board, and then by the canonical administrators, made up of a group of our local parish priests.





## Recommendations for creating and maintaining a safe and supportive whole school learning environment

These recommendations are presented to Catholic school administrators so that they can incorporate within their school administrative processes, their educational curriculum, their behaviour and disciplinary processes and their pastoral care programs an awareness and a sensitivity to the presence of same sex attracted students within their school community.

These recommendations have emerged from widespread consultation and discussion with educational administrators, teachers, student counsellors and pastoral care coordinators in Catholic secondary schools throughout Australia.

- 6.1 It is recommended that an integrated approach be undertaken by each Catholic secondary school that recognises the relationship between the school's mission statement, its policies and guidelines, its procedures and practices and its curriculum content in seeking to ensure a safe learning environment for all students.
- 6.2 It is recommended that a "whole of school approach" be adopted by each Catholic secondary school that clearly reflects an awareness of the presence of same sex attracted individuals in its student community.
- 6.3 It is recommended that Catholic secondary school Councils or Boards, Principals and teachers become informed of their obligations and responsibilities under Commonwealth, State and Territory legislation in relation to human rights and equal opportunity, common law, criminal law and child protection legislation in relation to same sex attracted students.
- 6.4 It is recommended that each Catholic secondary school includes in its discrimination and harassment policies, guidelines and procedures that address homophobia, along with sexism, racism and other forms of violence.
- 6.5 It is recommended that Catholic secondary schools review their existing policies, procedures, guidelines, programs and practices to ensure that they are inclusive of the needs of same sex attracted students.
- 6.6 It is recommended that Catholic School Principals involve all members of staff in the review of such policies and procedures and seek the endorsement of the School Council or Board of any changes made.
- 6.7 It is recommended that Catholic School Principals ensure that the review of such policies and procedures upholds and clearly expresses the Catholic Church's view on the value and dignity of each individual.

- 6.8 It is recommended that each Catholic secondary school should seek to create an inclusive and supportive environment in which staff and students feel confident to explore issues of identity, difference and similarity.
- 6.9 It is recommended that in implementing policies in relation to same sex attracted students, Catholic secondary schools be conscious of the needs of families and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and ensure these are respected in shaping interventions.
- 6.10 It is recommended that Catholic secondary schools located in rural or remote areas recognise and respond to the specific needs of same sex attracted students, namely their isolation, lack of support services and their information and resource deficit, in comparison with students attending city schools.
- 6.11 It is recommended that Catholic secondary schools clearly articulate the Church's teaching on sexuality and on sexual expression to ensure that the values underlying that teaching are carefully considered by their students and that students be given the opportunity to discuss these values so that their implications can be explored together rather than simply imposed.
- 6.12 It is recommended that Catholic secondary schools implement a pastoral care program that reflects the Church's positive teaching on the pastoral care of homosexual persons.
- 6.13 It is recommended that Catholic Education Offices provide support to Catholic secondary schools, by way of professional supervision and staff development programs, to enable them to increase their capacity to provide effective pastoral care of same sex attracted students.
- 6.14 It is recommended that Catholic Church leaders endorse the efforts of Catholic Education Offices and School Principals in fulfilling their obligation to provide a safe learning environment for all students.
- 6.15 It is recommended that Catholic secondary schools address the needs and the concerns of parents and family members by involving them in programs aimed at addressing homophobia and discrimination against same sex attracted students.
- 6.16 It is recommended that Catholic secondary schools establish working relationships with Catholic welfare agencies able to assist with the provision of services for same sex attracted students.
- 6.17 It is recommended that Catholic secondary schools carefully assess the suitability of other than Catholic community agencies and services from which they may seek assistance in supporting same sex attracted students, to ensure a compatibility of values and beliefs and an integrated approach.
- 6.18 It is recommended that Catholic secondary schools exercise care in selecting suitable resource material, literature and publications to be made available within school libraries or resource centres, or to be used in the teaching curriculum, in relation to sexual identity and orientation to ensure that such materials are consistent with the values of the school.
- 6.19 It is recommended that Catholic school administrators respond to each instance of student complaint of discrimination or harassment in relation to same sex attraction and monitor the number and nature of the complaints as one means of assessing the school's performance.
- 6.20 It is recommended that Catholic school administrators support and supervise the work of student counsellors and pastoral care team members in their work with same sex attracted students, ensuring that all school staff understand the Church's teaching on sexual morality and that appropriate levels of professionalism and confidentiality are maintained.
- 6.21 It is recommended that Catholic school administrators provide staff development and in-service training programs that incorporate strategies for consistently dealing with language or behaviour that discriminates against same sex attracted students.

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Peter Norden is an Adjunct Professor in the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies at RMIT University.

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As a former Chaplain to Pentridge Prison in the 1980's he saw at first hand the consequences of a breakdown in human relationships and the impact of mental illness and addiction.

In 2007, he was made an Officer in the Order of Australia 'for service to community development through social research and programs aimed at assisting marginalised young people and offenders, to the mental health sector, and to the Catholic Church in Australia'.

He was recently appointed a Fellow of the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology.







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